

Lytton Strachey: Lancaster Gate

Lytton Strachey's memoir of his early home was written for the Memoir Club in June 1922, after one by Virginia Woolf about her Hyde Park Gate home (on the other side of Kensington Gardens). Strachey's parents Sir Richard (1817–1908), a retired Indian administrator and scientist, and his second wife Jane Maria Grant (1840–1928) moved their family to Lancaster Gate in 1884, when Lytton was four, and he grew up there with his four brothers and five sisters. (For a view of the Strachey menage from the outside, see Leonard Woolf's memoir p. 378.) Among the people referred to in the memoir of a late Victorian drawing-room's atmosphere are the painter Frederic Leighton, the entertainer and author George Grossmith, four of Lytton's sisters – Dorothy, Philippa, Pernel, and Marjorie – and Lady Strachey's nephew Duncan Grant. Strachey's memoir was published posthumously by Michael Holroyd in Lytton Strachey by Himself (1971).

The influence of houses on their inhabitants might well be the subject of a scientific investigation. Those curious contraptions of stones or bricks, with all their peculiar adjuncts, trimmings, and furniture, their specific immutable shapes, their intense and insipid atmosphere, in which our lives are entangled as completely as our souls in our bodies – what powers do they not wield over us, what subtle and pervasive effects upon the whole substance of our existence may not be theirs? Or is that all nonsense? Our fathers, no doubt, would have laughed at such a speculation, for to our fathers the visible conformations of things were

unimportant; they were more interested in the mental and moral implications of their surroundings than in the actual nature of them; and their spirits, so noble and oblivious, escaped the direct pressure of the material universe. They could understand that it would make a difference whether one spent one's life in an ancient family seat in Gloucestershire or in a red-brick villa at Tooting – the social, personal, and traditional distinctions were obvious enough. But the notion that the proportions of a bedroom, for instance, might be significant would have appeared absurd to them; and so they were able to create, and to inhabit, South Kensington almost unconsciously, as if such conduct were the most natural thing in the world. Our view is different. We find satisfaction in curves and colours, and windows fascinate us, we are agitated by staircases, inspired by doors, disgusted by cornices, depressed by chairs, made wanton by ceilings, entranced by passages, and exacerbated by a rug.

In my case at any rate the impression caused by a house has been profound and extraordinary. I say impression, because as to more remote effects – such is the subtlety and complexity of the question – I hardly know what they may have been, or even whether there were any; but a memorable impression is beyond a doubt. Of all my dreams (and I am a confirmed dreamer) there is one alone which persistently recurs, only slightly varying in its details, with a curious iteration. For some reason or another – one of those preposterous and yet absolutely satisfying reasons which occur in dreams – we are back again, once more, just as we were, in Lancaster Gate. We are in the drawing-room, among the old furniture, arranged in the old way, and it is understood that we are to go there indefinitely, as if we had never left it. The strange thing is that, when I realize that this has come about, that our successive wanderings have been a mere interlude, that we are once more permanently established at number 69, a feeling of intimate satisfaction comes over me. I am positively delighted. And this is strange because, in my waking life, I have never for a moment, so far as I am aware, regretted our departure from that house, and if, in actuality, we *were* to return to it, I can imagine nothing which would disgust me more. So, when I wake up, and find myself after all at Gordon Square or Tidmarsh, I have the odd sensation of a tremendous relief at finding that my happiness of one second before was a delusion.

Apart from my pleasure at it, no doubt it is hardly surprising that Lancaster Gate should haunt me. For it was a portentous place, and I spent in it the first twenty-five years of my conscious life. My remembrances of Stowey House are dim and sporadic – Jim Rendel with a penny in a passage – a miraculous bean at the bottom of the garden – Beatrice Chamberlain playing at having tea with me, with leaves and